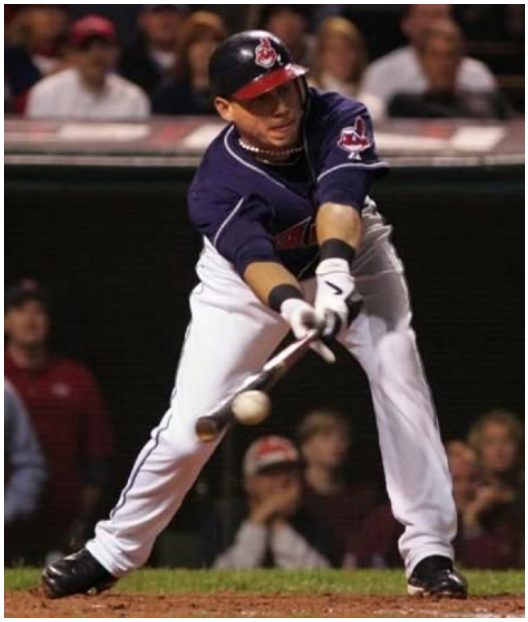
One of the more interesting developments in Winter Haven is Eric Wedge's announcement that Asdrubal Cabrera is not necessarily slated to fill the #2 spot in the lineup out of spring training, despite the fact the team went 24-6 over the final 30 games of the 2007 season with Asdrubal hitting behind Grady. Without an obvious replacement for him in the two-hole on the roster, what gives? Paul tackles the two hole in the batting order in his latest.



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Allow me for a moment to enter my time machine and go back to spring training in 2006. The Indians, fresh off a 93-win season, felt that their lineup was set for the 2006 season, based mainly upon the offense sprouting wings when Jhonny Peralta was inserted into the #3 spot in the lineup in 2005. After spending most of 2005 in the bottom half of the lineup, Peralta was placed in the three-hole on July 23rd and the Tribe proceeded to a 43-14 record over their next 57, placing them firmly in the race for the AL Central, before choking away the final six games of the 2005 season with a 1-5 record. Regardless of the end result, Peralta thrived in his new spot in the lineup, stroking 12 HR with 40 RBI over his 63 games there, posting a .887 OPS from the #3 spot.

Heading into 2006, Peralta was handed (and rightfully so) his spot in the lineup with the thought that the Indians had found their right handed complement to sit behind Grady and in front of Hafner in the lineup, with Victor providing the back-end protection for Pronk. But Peralta stumbled out of the gate (whether his

vision truly had anything to do with remains a mystery), posting a .239 BA and a .699 OPS out of the #3 hole for the 71 games he found his name occupying that spot in the lineup card. On July 6th, with the Tribe scuffling at 39-45, a staggering 17 ½ games back of Detroit, Peralta was moved out of the #3 spot, replaced by (get this) Ronnie Belliard for a short time, and edged back down to the bottom half of the order that he finds himself to this day.

In hindsight, did the Indians make a critical error out of Spring Training 2006 by handing Peralta a spot in the middle of the lineup? Certainly not, as many simply assumed that Peralta had established himself as a middle-of-the-order hitter in 2005, with his phenomenal success as a 23-year-old (with an OPS of .886) who would continue to mature and improve while anchoring the Tribe lineup.

But the Indians must see parallels between the situation involving Peralta and the #3 hole, circa Spring 2006, and Cabrera in the #2 hole this Spring. Enough parallels, apparently, that they feel that the axiom that "those who forget history are doomed to repeat it" applies to the construction of their lineup entering 2008.

Are they valid?

Time will tell if the adjustments that the league made to Peralta between his breakout year and 2006 are waiting for Asdrubal when he enters the batter's box this year and whether the Indians, sensing this adjustment period, have decided to let Asdrubal make his trips around MLB (with extensive video on him now in the can) at the bottom of the order as opposed to the spot between Grady and Pronk. If Cabrera struggles out of the gate, the concerns will be validated as he won't figure to be the reason that Grady doesn't see any decent pitches as would pitchers simply pitch around him to get to Asdrubal. However, if Cabrera proves to be as adept at handling the lumber in 2008 as he did in 2007, he will eventually find his way back up to the top of the order.

But "eventually" is the key word there as the Indians, if they are truly hesitant to start Asdrubal at the top of the order, will have to find a suitable hitter to sit between Grady and Pronk until Cabrera is able to fully prove himself as a legitimate #2 hitter to the Tribe brass.

So, what other internal options are the Indians looking at?

Obviously Grady (#1), Hafner (#3), Victor (#4), Garko (#5 or #6), Peralta (#5 or #6), Blake (bottom of the order, as per Wedge), and Cabrera (see above) are out, we find ourselves looking to the corners with Dellichaels and Frank the Tank being the only options to start the season as the #2 hitter.

Where have I seen this before?

Oh yeah, that's right - out of spring training last year, the #2 hole was thought to be occupied by Michaels and Nixon. OK, OK, everyone put that memory back into the recesses of your mind that have been blacked out, along with that night that you and your buddy decided that finishing a bottle of Jagrmeister was a good idea before hitting the bars.

But back to the matter at hand - at the risk of identifying the obvious, the most important attributes for a #2 hitter are a high OBP, the ability to work the count resulting in a high number of pitches per at-bat to allow the meat of the lineup to see the pitchers' repertoire, and (to a lesser degree) speed to prevent the inning-killing GIDP and to be able to score from 1st (and certainly 2nd) on a gapper by the #3 or #4 hitters. Unique to the Indians' situation, the importance of breaking up Sizemore and Hafner (both left handed) also plays a role, particularly late in the game when a left handed reliever would have the opportunity to face three straight left handed Tribe hitters, unless you really expect to see the likes of Andy Marte pinch-hitting in the 8th or 9th for Dellucci...and given Wedge's quotes on Marte this Spring, I don't.

Looking again at those desired attributes, then it begs the question - who (knowing that Cabrera is not a candidate from Day One) best fits the bill on the Tribe roster? You're not going to like this, but it's probably Casey Blake, who while he doesn't have the high OBP you would hope for, at least doesn't have a huge disparity against left handed pitching (career .342 OBP vs. LHP) and right handed pitching (career .328 OBP vs. RHP) that some other players do, did see more pitches per plate appearance than anyone on the team last year (tied for 10th most in the AL at 4.17, eking out Grady's 4.15), and has decent speed (though his 14 GIDP in 2007 were second only to Victor, whose high number of 23 is explained by his similarities to a glacier). The fact that he's right handed and wouldn't force the lineup to be juggled late in the game takes up another spot in the "positive" ledger. But we know that Blake is slated to hit at the bottom of the lineup as The Atomic Wedgie likes his "pop" down there.

So we're back to where we started with Dellichaels and Franklin Delano Gutierrez as the candidates. Realizing that Michaels won't face RHP and Dellucci won't face LHP while Gutierrez's numbers prior to 2007 are minimal, here is how the players stack up in the important categories:

OBP

Michaels 2007 (vs. LHP) - .359
Michaels career (vs. LHP) - .382

Dellucci 2007 (vs. RHP) - .306
Dellucci career (vs. RHP) - .355

Gutierrez 2007 (vs. LHP) - .366
Gutierrez 2007 (vs. RHP) - .292

P/PA

Michaels 2007 - 3.85
Michaels career - 3.98

Dellucci 2007 - 3.99
Dellucci career - 3.91

Gutierrez 2007 - 4.02

In case you were wondering, Asdrubal posted a .354 OBP vs. LHP and a .353 OBP vs. RHP while seeing 3.80 pitches per plate appearance a year ago. But for the moment, forget about him, he's NOT an option out of the gate, remember?

As much as his speed, ability to see pitches, and right-handedness may help Frank's case, I can't imagine that they would slot him up there if there's truly a reticence to put Cabrera, a more obvious choice, there out of Spring Training. The Indians also probably have some concern about Gutz's OBP vs. RHP in 2007, despite him posting overall OBP of .384 in Buffalo prior to his call-up last year after posting an overall OBP of .373 in 2006. It is true that his 2006 split in Buffalo was significant, if not drastic (.413 OBP vs. LHP, .362 OBP vs. RHP) but as Gutierrez adapts (hopefully) to MLB hitting as he has had a strong Spring (.417 OBP and, most importantly, "only" 6 K in 38 plate appearances) he

could certainly be a candidate to move up the ladder of the lineup.

But that move of Frank the Tank to #2 doesn't seem immediately imminent as it would seem that the Indians (while they haven't come out and said it yet) figure to be starting the season with Dellichaels as the #2 hitter. Seeing as how Dellucci (assuming this forearm injury allows him to break camp with the team) is the only real option to face RHP at the #2 spot, one would have to assume that the two-headed monster of Michaels and Dellucci are going to be given the first crack at the second spot in the lineup, for better or worse.

If, however, either (or both) of the players prove to be ineffective at the top of the lineup by, say, the middle of May, don't be surprised if the Indians take a hard look at the numbers of both Asdrubal AND Franklin to determine who is having the most success against LHP and RHP while seeing a good amount of pitches per plate appearance. If both are struggling to find their footing (knocking firmly on wood) in their first full MLB season, don't be shocked if Mr. Fill-In-The-Cracks himself, Casey Blake inches his way up the lineup. If that comes to pass, however, that would mean that 1/3 of the lineup is underperforming (Dellichaels, Asdrubal, and Frank) and bigger changes than simply moving Casey up the lineup would likely be afoot.

Personally, I'd play it in the exact opposite manner, giving Asdrubal every opportunity to seize the spot that he so definitively laid claim to down the stretch in 2007.

Give Cabrera the nod out of Winter Haven to plant himself as the de facto #2 hitter - if he falters, let the second chance fall to Dellichaels or Gutierrez; but forcing Cabrera (unless the Indians know something that we don't regarding "the book" around the league on their young 2B) to earn the role of the #2 hitter all over again seems like punishing one player for the shortcomings of another in a similar situation, two years after the fact.